

## Net Art: Connected or Inter-connected?

By Jo-Anne Green

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Internet media blur the distinction between, amongst others, network/hierarchy, local/global, real/virtual, artist/audience, activism/aesthetics, interaction/participation; rather than separating one from the other “the slashes turn out to be permeable membranes rather than leakproof barriers.” (Peter Lunenfeld) This bleeding through can be thought of as a feedback loop, in which human-machine, human-human, machine-machine *dialogue* occurs. Feedback can be anything from clicking on a link to uploading a file to a server; the amount of feedback allowed within a system pre-determines whether the system is ‘open’ or ‘closed’ (or, perhaps, somewhere in-between). Early on, in the United States, the Internet was touted as a many-to-many, *conversational* (open) system; it is gradually moving towards a one-to-many (closed) system – becoming more like radio and television – as corporations attempt to control both the content and its delivery to consumers. More and more, the hype about *interactivity* and *participation* (feedback) – in the arts, as in commerce – creates the illusion of individual agency and conversation.

In the late 1960s, curator and critic Jack Burnham wrote, “we are now in transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented* culture. Here change emanates not from things, but from *the way things are done*.” Burnham was influenced by “Cybernetics” – the study of the communication, feedback, and control mechanisms of living systems and machines – and he predicted that communications networks would facilitate “real time systems” which would be able to “gather and process data from environments *in time* to *effect future events* within those environments.”

Although the Internet was not widely used until the 1990s, what Burnham described is Net Art at its most authentic: real time systems in which practitioners creatively explore the Internet as a site of *production, transmission, reception, production, transmission, reception* (i.e. cycles of co-creation). Net Art emphasizes interactivity, process, and time and is often characterized by indeterminacy, flux, and emergence. However, although machine-human systems – computers, mobile devices, the Internet, social networks, virtual worlds – sustain the *potential* for open-ended cycles of feedback and exchange, many Net Art works are not open to *co-creation*. Many are single feedback loop systems in which ‘users’ have limited agency to reveal what the ‘artist’ has hidden. (Usman Haque) *Click here and I’ll show you this; now, click here and I’ll show you something else*. The closed nature of these works allows them to be viewed or exhibited without being connected to the Internet. In these instances, the slash between artist and audience is no longer permeable.

Alternately, a networked, participatory system – in which the *relationships among the parts* (humans, machines and, perhaps, nature) take precedence – allows it to remain in a state of perpetual becoming. In responding to variable inputs, it is, itself, variable; it is *conversational*.

For more on this topic, see my paper [Interactivity and Agency in Real Time Systems](#).

## BIOGRAPHY

Jo-Anne Green is Co-Director of [New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc.](#) – producer and presenter of [Turbulence.org](#), which has commissioned, exhibited, and archived over 200 Net Art works since 1996; and hosted more than 20 networked performances. Other NRPA projects include [Networked Performance](#), [Networked Music Review](#), [Networked: a \(networked\\_book\) about \(networked\\_art\)](#), [Mixed Realities](#), and [New American Radio](#). In 2005, Green founded [Upgrade! Boston](#), a new media speaker series and one of thirty nodes active in the Upgrade! International network. Green has exhibited her paintings, prints, one-of-a-kind artist's books, and installations in Johannesburg, Massachusetts and New York. She has taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Emerson College, Boston; and the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She is also a curator, writer and designer. Green lives in Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

## URLS

<http://new-radio.org>

<http://turbulence.org>

<http://somewhere.org>

<http://turbulence.org/blog>

<http://networkedbook.org>

[http://turbulence.org/mixed\\_realities](http://turbulence.org/mixed_realities)

[http://turbulence.org/upgrade\\_boston](http://turbulence.org/upgrade_boston)

[http://turbulence.org/networked\\_music\\_review](http://turbulence.org/networked_music_review)

[http://turbulence.org/jo/interactivity\\_and\\_agency.pdf](http://turbulence.org/jo/interactivity_and_agency.pdf)